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University Psychology Department

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Psych NUWS

The Newsletter of the Northeastern University Psychology Department

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From the Editor

Go see your advisor! All too many of our undergrads postpone or avoid seeing their advisor, and similarly they don't take the initiative to develop a relationship with one or more faculty members. For advising questions, you *can* see a "walk-in" advisor, but it is better to have continuity with one faculty member. Talking to an advisor can prevent bad course choices, but there are reasons other than that. Advice about career plans, grad programs, or even about life in general can result from such a relationship.

Furthermore, you should go see the professors whose courses you are in. Mostly, professors just sit in their offices waiting and hoping for students to come to office hours. When students do come, it is

mostly with a specific task in mind, such as discussing an exam or an assignment. But your professor is a much more valuable resource than that! Believe it or not, the faculty want to talk with you about the course material (or anything else you want to talk about). You don't have to be either brilliant or failing to justify seeing your professor. Every student would benefit from the one-on-one contact. And this is especially true if you ever might want a letter of recommendation. You might get an A in the course, but if the professor doesn't know you personally, he/she can't do a good job on a recommendation. And, finally, we professors benefit from hearing what's on your mind—about the course, or about other things. So remember, seeing your professor is not like going to the dentist! It can actually be fun to talk to us.

Prof. McLaughlin Is In An Exciting (Temporary) Place

Prof. McLaughlin will be working for the next year developing a new research project in collaboration with the Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies (TPIMS), located in Port St. Lucie, Florida. At TPIMS, he will develop new methods and oversee the screening of a library of over two million novel opioid compounds as low-abuse liability analgesics. This may lead to the development of new compounds that are predicted to have therapeutic benefits in the treatment of depression and anxiety. Prof. McLaughlin told *Psych NUWS* that research already underway in his lab at Northeastern University has identified promising lead compounds to guide this process, but he lacks the ability and resources to synthesize and screen the combinatorial peptide libraries that will be produced from this unique collaborative opportunity. With the assistance pledged by TPIMS, he will develop

these new compounds, the methods for their creation, and the means to rapidly screen them. It is Prof. McLaughlin's intention to then bring this technology back when he returns in a year to continue the work in his present laboratory at Northeastern University. The eventual goal of this effort is to eventually lead to the development of commercial ventures to market the most promising therapeutic agents so identified.

Prof. McLaughlin is investigating the possibility of having a few co-op students down there for the next cycle. You should write to him if you might be interested.

One More Reason Psychology Is Relevant in Courtrooms

When a piece of evidence is discredited in a court case, does this affect how jurors perceive the rest of the evidence? Suppose you are a juror in a criminal case. Two witnesses, Mr. Smith and Ms. Brown, separately testify that they saw the suspect at the scene of the crime. Then, the defense attorney reveals that Mr. Smith holds a grudge against the suspect. As a juror, this would probably make you more skeptical of Mr. Smith's testimony. But should this also affect your belief in Ms. Brown's testimony? If Mr. Smith and Ms. Brown are independent from one another (e.g., they don't know each other), then your judgment of Ms. Brown should probably be unaffected. But if Mr. Smith and Ms. Brown do know each other, then the discrediting of Mr. Smith's testimony might cause you to be more skeptical of Ms. Brown's testimony as well.

Let's take another example. Suppose that in this same case, lab tests confirm that fingerprints at the crime scene match the suspect's. Should we be skeptical of these lab tests just because Mr. Smith's eyewitness

testimony has been discredited? This doesn't seem rational, because forensic lab tests seem pretty independent from a person's eyewitness testimony. Yet in a study by Lagnado and Harvey in the December 2008 issue of *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, people who read scenarios like the ones described above were more skeptical of all evidence (e.g., Ms. Brown's testimony; forensic evidence) when one piece of evidence (e.g., Mr. Smith's testimony) was discredited. This unexpected finding suggests that the effect of discrediting evidence is broad and general; even a completely unrelated piece of forensic evidence is believed less strongly when the testimony of one witness is discredited. Although the authors caution that more research is needed before applying this research directly to legal settings, they do note that these findings may tell us something about the way we process information every day about court cases reported in the news.

--Prof. Kim

You've Heard This Before, But Listen Up Because It's True

There has been much talk about the risks of using cell phones while driving. Research is accumulating. Research has shown that talking on a cell phone while driving increases the risk of an accident fourfold. Furthermore, more than half of US drivers admit to talking on the phone while driving. One study estimates that annually in the US there are 2,600 deaths and 330,000 injuries stemming from cell phone use by drivers. The inattention caused by talking on the phone seems to be considerably greater than that produced by talking with a passenger. One study estimates that a driver talking on a cell phone is more impaired than one with a blood alcohol level exceeding 0.08. But

although most people are wary of driving with someone who has been drinking, they are casual about driving with a cell phone user.

Even pedestrians put themselves at risk while they are talking on the phone—research shows that they look less carefully when stepping into the street and they cross more slowly. Of course, text messaging is even more distracting. A survey in the UK found that a full 10% of respondents reported being injured while walking and texting.

Human factors psychologists have been documenting many of these effects, studying behaviors such as drifting out of one's lane as a function of various distracters. They are also researching solutions. As one example, eye-tracking technology is being studied that monitors what the driver is looking at and issues a warning when the driver looks away from the road for more than two seconds. Another system actually prevents the driver from receiving phone calls if the system determines that driving conditions are too dangerous.

We are doing more and more multitasking these days. But this is one kind of multitasking we really cannot afford to do.

--Summarized from APA's *Monitor on Psychology*, February 2009

Psych NUws Interviews

Rhonda Johnson, New

Mainstay in 125 NI

This week, an intrepid *Psych NUws* reporter intercepted Rhonda and conducted one of our famous interviews! Read on...

Psych NUws: What was your background before coming to NU?

Rhonda: My background and degree are in education. I worked in the Boston Public Schools for 10 years in a substantially separate special education school. My position progressed over the years from paraprofessional to head teacher. After taking time off to be with my growing family, I returned to work for METCO Inc. (Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity Inc.) as placement coordinator. Shortly after, I advanced to Program Director where I worked in two different suburban school districts.

Psych NUws: What attracted you to NU?

Rhonda: Northeastern is a great educational institution of higher learning. Being here has granted me the opportunity to work within an environment that endorses and promotes the advancement of all people through education. It is a pleasure to be here amongst so many wonderful people.

Psych NUws: Anything 'personal' you'd like to share--family, interests, hobbies, etc.? Comments on the world, etc.?

Rhonda: My family is at the top of my list of interests. I have a husband and three wonderful children that I adore and who keep me very busy. Outside of my family, there are many things I enjoy doing. To state briefly, I love to go new places, meet new people, and eat new foods. Family and friends often call me "Lady Adventure". What can I say? Four-wheeling and snowmobiling get my adrenaline going. On the flip side, I also enjoy slowing it down to curl up with a good book by a warm fire as soft music fills the room.

Life is a miracle and doesn't last forever. I encourage everyone to be wise, try to make the right choices, learn from your mistakes when you don't, and aim high.

NUws of Our Grads: Brian Feinstein, '07

I graduated from Northeastern with a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and American Sign Language. As an undergraduate, I had worked in several psychology labs in order to explore various areas within psychology. As graduation neared, I knew that I was interested in pursuing an advanced degree in clinical psychology, but I had no clinical research experience and I had an overwhelming number of research interests, making it nearly impossible to decide what type of research I wanted to pursue. After graduating, I decided to accept a research assistantship at the National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Boston, Massachusetts, to gain clinical research experience and to explore the field of clinical psychology in an attempt to narrow my personal research interests. At the National Center for PTSD, I have been involved in several research projects with a wide range of responsibilities such as preparing and submitting grant and Institutional Review Board applications, recruiting and running participants, conducting clinical interviews, conducting statistical analyses, and presenting and publishing the results of such work.

I am currently in the process of applying to doctoral programs in clinical psychology, with the ultimate goal of working in an academic or medical setting that enables me to develop my own line of research. Specifically, I am interested in the unique ways in which minority identity (particularly in regard to sexual orientation and gender identity) influences psychopathology and interpersonal relationships. I am also interested in developing empirically based interventions that address these unique stressors.

For those students who are interested in applying to doctoral programs in psychology, I would highly recommend that you pursue additional research training in between completing your undergraduate degree and applying to doctoral programs. It is a highly competitive field, and while it may seem like you're postponing the inevitable by extending an already lengthy process, the experience that can be gained from a post-baccalaureate research assistantship is invaluable. Such a position has the potential to enhance your research skills, increase the number of presentations and publications on your curriculum vitae, and further your connections to other professionals in the field. Overall, my post-baccalaureate experience has built upon the strong foundation that Northeastern provided me with and I look forward to continuing my education as a graduate student in the years to come.

Great Master's Programs You Can Apply For!

BE BOLD! HOW ABOUT STUDYING SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY IN AMSTERDAM?? (DON'T WORRY--IT'S ALL IN ENGLISH!)

Dear colleagues, I'd like to call your attention to our unique and outstanding Research Master's Program in Social Psychology. The VU University Amsterdam offers an outstanding 2-year Research Master's Program in Social Psychology. The program adopts a multi-disciplinary and research-oriented approach to understanding fundamental social psychological processes, incorporating biological, cognitive, economic, neuroscientific, and evolutionary perspectives. The teaching include themes such as self-regulation, cognition and emotion, motivation and communication, interpersonal relations, group processes, as

well as important skills-related courses such as writing and presenting, methods and statistics, and translating knowledge to help understand important social issues (such as discrimination, conflict, environmental issues, and economic decision making). Importantly, all program activities are in English. Our faculty are strong scientists and teachers, who provide excellent support in the form of mentorship and research supervision. The students come here from around the world. We encourage applications from intelligent, enthusiastic, and highly motivated students. We provide good support for immigration procedures, we offer a number of merit-based fellowships and grants, and students can also apply for university housing. Following completion of the program, students will enjoy excellent prospects, including opportunities for PhD work (over 50% of our graduates found PhD work here at the VU or elsewhere), or jobs in the public or private sector. And last but not least, Amsterdam is an easy and attractive place to live for non-Dutch speakers! So... this is a terrific program, and a terrific opportunity! More information can be obtained by contacting Carla Heldens (socialpsychology@psy.vu.nl), or through our website: www.williamjames.nl .

HOW ABOUT DOING OUR MASTER'S IN BEAUTIFUL CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS? THIS ONE EVEN OFFERS A STIPEND!!

As the Chair of the Mount Holyoke Psychology Department, I am writing to tell you about a unique opportunity that might be suitable for your students. Mount Holyoke has a Master of Arts program in psychology that is not well-publicized. The two-year program leading to an M.A. in psychology provides students with the opportunity to: 1) take 30 academic credits tuition-free, 2) engage in research under the

supervision of one of the department faculty, 3) gain teaching experience as a teaching assistant, 4) earn a stipend of \$11,000 per year. Most of our past graduate students have used this two-year period to gain additional experience in a particular area within psychology and have gone on careers in psychology or to Ph.D. programs. Our small department offers students who have been undecided about graduate school the type of mentoring and supervision that can lead to increased understanding of the field of psychology and greater preparation for a career or advanced graduate study. If you have students who might be interested in applying, they should have: 1) a bachelor's degree with a major or minor in psychology, 2) prior course work in research methods and statistics, 3) some undergraduate research experience, 4) a record of good academic standing, and 5) an interest in assisting undergraduates gain an understanding of research in psychology.

To receive an application and/or additional information please contact Janet Crosby, Administrative Assistant for Psychology and Education, at 413-538-2422. You can also reach her by email at crosby@mtholyoke.edu or read our website at <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/psych/grad/prog.html>.

HOW ABOUT DOING YOUR MASTER'S UNDER THE BREATHTAKING SKIES OF MONTANA?

Dear Colleagues, If you have students who are interested in obtaining a Master's degree or attending a Masters program before applying to a Ph.D. program, I ask that you please forward them this message. We are highly interested in students who desire more research experience with the aim to continue onto a Ph.D. program. My colleague Jessi Smith at Montana State University and I are particularly interested in receiving applications from research-oriented

individuals interested in social psychology, although the department in general would like to consider more applications.

Montana State offers a research-oriented Masters program in Psychological Science. We have 7 research-active faculty members in the areas of cognitive, social, and physiological psychology. Further, we have a great subject pool and modern laboratory facilities (e.g., computers with research software). For information about the graduate program, see:
<http://www.montana.edu/wwwpy/msprogram.htm>

For faculty information, see:
<http://www.montana.edu/wwwpy/faculty.htm>
mand for general departmental information see:
<http://www.montana.edu/wwwpy>

Montana State University resides in the Gallatin Valley nestled by several mountain ranges, and is close to three ski resorts and Yellowstone National Park. This is a great place to love life and research.

The Hostile Way of Life

When I hear that a person is really big and hostile, I fear for my safety. If I hear that a person is small and hostile, I prepare for a verbal lashing and then fear for my safety. I suppose the size of the person does not really matter, I simply don't enjoy spending time with hostile people. My guess is that you don't either.

You may not know a lot about what hostile people, just that they are mean and nasty. It is hard to really know them because they start pushing you away from the moment you meet them. Psychologists are a strange bunch and are willing to hang around hostile people to learn more about them. My two

graduate students, Krista Hill and Bob Griffo, and I decided to do a study on people who are more and less hostile. We obviously survived to tell our story; here is what we found.

Our first question was a pretty obvious one. What are hostile people like, particularly in terms of their personality and behavior? We started by giving a standard hostility questionnaire to about 50 men and 50 women. We then asked our participants to recruit two friends, if they had any, who would be willing to rate the participant's personality. The most hostile people were rated as being low on agreeableness (remember the Big 5?). The friends also said that their hostile acquaintances were negative, critical, condescending, and defensive. We then brought our participants into the lab and asked them to have a one-on-one conversation with another participant, which we videotaped. After the conversation was over both people rated how much they enjoyed the interaction. If a person was hostile, the partner said they didn't like the interaction. Remember the videotape? We had a large team of undergraduates help us evaluate participants' behavior in the interactions. The behavior of hostile people was described as detached, sarcastic, and self-pitying. You might conclude that hostile people ooze unpleasantness, and you would be correct. Our second question was a little less obvious. We learned that hostile people exhibit unpleasant behavior, but we wondered if they perceive other people differently than the rest of us. To test this question, we had each of our participants watch four 12 minute videotapes of a person in a one-on-one interaction. The participants watched the same four videotapes, two of which showed women and the other two showed men interacting with others. After watching each videotape,

participants were asked to rate the personality of the person in the tape. Since all participants watched the same videotapes and rated the same four people, we might expect participants to generally agree about the personality of each person on the tape. But this did not occur. Rather, hostile participants, relative to less hostile participants, rated the videotaped people as being much more condescending, neurotic, and distrustful. In short, hostile people were biased and “saw” others in their social world as possessing very negative characteristics.

These results give us a little more understanding about the life of the hostile person. They see an unpleasant social world and act in a hostile manner toward it. Of course, the question that remains is why did these people become hostile in the first place?

--Prof. Colvin

How People Interpret Their Dreams and What Impact That Has

Everyone has had dreams that are joyful or disturbing, or just so weird and dramatic that they linger in consciousness for hours or even days. Now, social psychologists have gathered systematic knowledge about how people react to and interpret their dreams, in particular predicting that people often give MORE weight to dream interpretations than they would to the same kinds of events in daily life. As a consequence, people allow themselves to be highly influenced by their dreams.

In one study, they asked participants in the US, South Korea, and India to rank four different possible causes/functions of dreams. In each country, participants were far more likely to say that dreams reveal hidden truths about their emotions that are

coming out in disguised form in the dream, than to say that dreams are random neurological activity or that dreams help with learning or problem solving.

In a second study, participants said that dreaming of a plane crash would be more likely to affect their travel plans than would just thinking about a crash, or being warned by the government of a heightened terrorism risk. They said a dreamed crash would influence their travel plans just as much as learning about a real crash would.

In another study by the same authors, participants recalled actual positive or negative dreams about liked or disliked individuals and were asked how much importance and meaning they ascribed to the dream. Positive dreams about liked others, and negative dreams about disliked others, were seen as more important and meaningful by the participants, thus revealing that people give preferential weight to dreams that fit with their existing schemas about people they know. So, it may not be so much that your dreams are telling you something, as that you are making use of dream content to fit your own needs and desires.

The full article appears in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, February 2009.

Psych NUws is a joint effort of the faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, and staff of the Northeastern University Psychology Department. Direct all inquiries and contributions to the Editor, Prof. Judith Hall. We especially welcome contributions from undergraduates!